NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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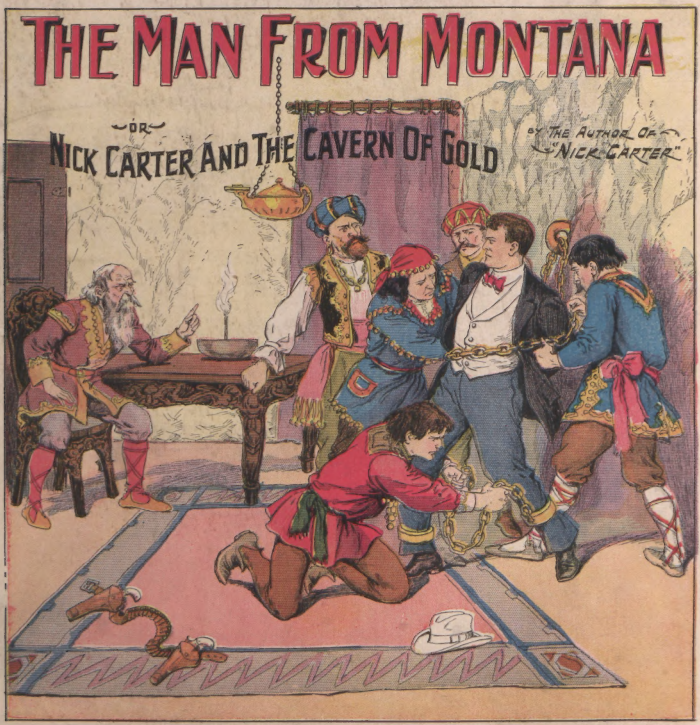
No. 501 NEW YORK, AUGUST 4, 1906. Price, Five Cents

# THE MAN FROM MONTANA

## OR NICK CARTER AND THE CAVERN OF GOLD

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



A golden chain was drawn around Nick's arms, another was thrown around his ankles, and he was securely fastened to a ring that was set into the wall.

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# The Man from Montana;

OR,

## Nick Carter and the Cavern of Gold.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

### CHAPTER I.

THE PRISONER IN THE CAVERN OF GOLD.

"I'm looking for Nick Carter, mister."

"Oh, are you? What do you want with Nick Carter?"

It was Chick who made the last remark, ending with an interrogation, and the tall stranger who confronted him looked down upon the detective's assistant for a moment with a humorously quizzical expression in his eyes. Then he replied:

"Well, stranger, unless you happen to be Nick Carter himself, I don't see as how that's any of your dog-goned business!"

Chick smiled back at him good-naturedly.

"You look as though you might have come a considerable distance in order to see Nick Carter," he said.

"I have—if anybody should git off'n his cayuse and ask you, pard. I've moseyed out here all the way from Missoula County, in Montana, and I ain't quite clear in my head about the trails in this here locality. Mebby, pard, when you git all through joshin' me, you won't mind setting me straight. I reckon I'm a tenderfoot, all right, hereabouts. I was told that this here was Nick Carter's ranch."

"It is. This is his home."

"Do yeh happen to know if he's handy by, anywhere, pard?"

"I happen to know that he is out at present, but that he will return in a very few minutes. That is why I have kept you talking. I'm not joshing you, stranger. I'm only glad to see somebody from the far West, for that is where I was born—and partly raised."

"Yeh don't say! What might your name happen to be?"

"I'm called Chick, mostly."

"Chick, eh? That's a sort of a no-account name, don't you think so? It don't mean nothin', does it? 'Twasn't given yeh because of any personal resemblance, was it? You've been a-peepin' mighty strong since I hello'd the house, but I reckon yeh didn't mean no harm by it, did yeh?"

The detective's assistant laughed heartily at this, and stuck out his hand, with the remark:

"You had me that time, didn't you? I guess we're about quits now. But you haven't told me yet what your name is."

"Tom is my name, pard. Tom Short, if yeh want the hull name, although it don't fit very well, as yeh can see, for I stand considerably over six feet. I s'pose it's f'r that very reason that when the boys get gay they sometimes call me Shorty. But I don't mind what I'm called—anything'll do f'r me, if only the tone is right and the expression is all serene when it's said. You savvy?"

"Sure thing, Tom," replied Chick. "It must have been something important that got you so far away from the range as this, eh?"

The cowboy's eyes blinked shrewdly.

"Chick," he said easily, and with that ready familiarity which is bred only on the ranges of the Northwest, "I don't know whether yeh meant it 'r not, but that sounded to me mighty like what we uster call pumpin' in the dim long ago time. When Nick Carter rides in and throws the reins over his cayuse's head, I'll unbosom myself."

"All right," said Chick, laughing again. "Here he is now. He is just coming in. I'll tell him that a tenderfoot from the Missoula country wants to see him."

"And that won't be no idle dream, Chick, if somebody should corral yeh and ask yeh," was the quiet reply, accompanied by a grin. "I reckon yeh'r all right, sonny, and I shouldn't wonder if you and me could tie up together, all right, if the occasion should offer."

Chick left the room, laughing, and a moment later Nick Carter entered it.

"You wished to see me?" he asked inquiringly of the stranger.

"I sure do, if you're Nick Carter," was the instant reply; and the stranger pulled his tall form erect and extended a massive palm, which Nick Carter grasped instantly, for genuine and hearty honesty and good-will shone in the stranger's face, glistened in his humor-loving eyes, and seemed to exude from his huge frame.

The detective regarded the big man with some admiration, and Tom Short was not slow to see it. He laughed amusedly, and remarked:

"I reckon yeh must be a-thinkin', Mr. Carter, that when they made me they must ha' run out uh material f'r the rest of the fellers around there. To tell yeh the solemn truth, though, where I came from originally they're almost all as big as I be."

"And where was that?" asked the detective.

"Tennessee; only that was so long ago that I've clean forgot it. I struck the trail for Missoula when I was along about fifteen, and I ain't never been back East since then—till now."

"And now, my assistant tells me, you have come all the way here to see me."

"I sure have, pard."

"I can give you half an hour, Mr. Short. My time is——"

"Hey? What's that? *Mister* Short, eh? Gee! The boys sure would guy me if they'd a-heard that! Don't do that again, will yeh? Yeh'll sure git me rattled if yeh do. I'm jest plain Tom, 'r Short, 'r any old thing yeh care to call me, *except* mister. Tom'll do, I reckon; and if yeh don't mind, I'll call you Nick. It'll put me at my ease, so to speak. Have yeh ever been in Montana, Nick?"

"Yes."

"And up in the Missoula country?"

"Once."

"Do yeh happen to know anything about the Bitter Root range?"

"I have crossed the mountains on the railroad—that's about all."

"Mebby yeh know where Lake Bend d'Oreille is?"

"Yes. I know where it is; but that is all I do know about it."

"It's over the line into Idaho. It's up purty near to the north end of the Bitter Root range proper."

"Yes."

"And have yeh ever heard of a place called Murray up around there?"

"No."

"Well, it's on the map, 'cos I found it there. It's a little shack of a town, also and likewise over in Idaho, on the western slope of the mountains."

"What has all this to do with——"

"I'm a-gittin' there, Nick, if yeh'll jest cinch yehr patience up another hole."

"All right. Go ahead—only don't forget what I told you about the half-hour."

"Huh! I reckon yeh'll be glad to stay with me all day when yeh git next to what I've got to tell yeh. However, I'll round the yard up and bunch the main points of it before long. Where was I? Oh, yes. I was jest a-ridin' into Murray. Well, seh, I reckon it's about forty miles, or thereabouts, from Murray to the lower end of Lake d'Oreille, and the hull point of my yarn is this."

He paused impressively, and inadvertently began to roll a cigarette. Then he added:

"Somewheres along that forty miles, and within a space that mebby's about as wide as 'tis long, there's a mountain of solid gold, Nick; and in that mountain there's a cavern—we can't call it anything else, although it was dug out by the hands uh men, instead uh by nature—there's a cavern uh gold, too. I'll give yeh the particulars as we proceed."

Nick left his chair, somewhat impatiently, and crossed over to the mantel, where he stood, with his elbow resting upon it.

"I hope, Tom," he said, "that you did not come all the way to this coast in the hope or with the expectation that I could be induced to go fortune-hunting? Did you?"

"Not a bit of it, Nick. Set down, won't yeh? Thanks. I reckon yeh don't care any more about that gold than I do. I wouldn't give a picayune for the hull mountain! Not *me!* But——"

"Well?"

"There's something else inside uh that mountain that I *do* want—and I want it mighty doggoned bad, too!"

"What is it, Tom?"

"It's an angel, that's what it is! It's a slip of a girl who is jest about now comin' eighteen 'r nineteen, I forgit which."

"You will have to be somewhat more explicit, Tom."

"I sure will, and I'm goin' to be, in about a minute more. I'm a-gittin' to it as fast as I can."

"Well?"

"Jessie sort uh belongs to me, Nick. Phil Bowden, her father, was done up mighty bad by an outfit uh cattle-rustlers down on the range, which is more'n two hundred miles from there, and when he was a-peggin' out he says to me, 'Tom, I ain't got much to leave behind me but my war-bag and little Jessie, but I leaves 'em both to you. You look out f'r Jessie, Tom, and you see that no harm comes to her. She's yourn from now on; and when she's growed up, and got to be twenty-one, you can open that little steel box that's in my war-bag with the key that's hung around my neck. Don't forgit to take that key as soon's I'm dead, Tom,' he says. 'And don't forgit to open the steel box the day that Jessie's twenty-one. Yeh'll find some papers and other things there, Tom—and, when yeh've seen 'em, yeh'll know what to do.'

"Well, Nick, with that he up and died, and I've had Jessie and the steel box ever since; and that happened when Jessie was comin' six."

"Twelve or thirteen years ago, eh?" murmured the detective.

"*Eggs*-actly."

"And now tell me what Jessie has got to do with that mountain of gold that you spoke about?"

"There's a mystery about that part of it, Nick."

"I suppose so."

"Yeh see, when Jessie growed along up until she was gettin' to be a big girl, I begun to think that I couldn't keep her on the range with me no longer. It wasn't exactly proper f'r her, f'r one thing, and, besides that, she needed some schoolin'. So I makes arrangements with a schoolmarm who lives down one of the coulées a few miles. The schoolmarm's home is in that place called Murray, where she's got a mother and a sister about Jessie's age. And the schoolmarm's mother is an educated lady from the East, who will be gled to take Jessie and eddycate her, and so the upshot of it is that I sends Jessie up there—'r, rather, I takes her there myself, f'r I wanted to see where she was a-goin' to camp. That was when she was fifteen, Nick."

"Well?"

"Then, twice each year I mosey up there with my cayuse, to see her, and everything goes along mighty doggoned beautiful f'r her and f'r me until I made my last visit—which was jest three months ago."

"And then—what?"

"Jessie wasn't there, that's what! No more was her playmate and friend, Hilda Hart. They had been gone about a week, and the hull country had turned out to search for them, without any success. I turned out, too, you can bet yehr boots! And the second day I was there Hilda turns up, all of a sudden, one mornin' about daylight. She was blindfolded and tied to a hoss' back, and all she knowed was that somebody had led that hoss into town and then skiddoo'd out of it; and that she and Jessie had been prisoners inside that there cavern of gold in that there mountain of gold that I've been a-tellin' you about.

"That's what I'm here for, Nick Carter. I don't care about the gold, but I want to find my Jessie, and I've been told that you're the man to do it."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE CAPTURE OF THE TWO GIRLS.

"Tom," said the detective, after a moment of silence, "if you had not come to me in just the way you have, and if you had not told me this story in just your own quaint way, I should say that you are dreaming."

"And I don't know's I'd blamed you none, either," was the ready reply.

"I would have thought that you were locoed."

"You sure would."

"But as it is——"

"As it is, I have told you the plum truth."

"But how about the girl Hilda? Do you think that she told the truth, also?"

"I sure do, Nick."

"Who found her when she was blindfolded and tied to the horse?"

"I did."

"And so she told you the story first, did she? Before there were others near to hear it?"

"She did."

"Now, tell me what that story was."

"Well, 'twas this way: She and Jessie were great pards, and they had a pair uh ponies between 'em, which I took up f'r them a year before."

"So they were in the habit of riding out together on their ponies, eh?"

"Yep. Jest that. Sure."

"Well?"

"That day they disappeared they started out together, early, for a long ride, and they took a snack to eat along with them. They rode farther than they ever had done before, and finally they come to good water at the mouth of a coulée, and there they got down, staked out the ponies to feed, and began to feed themselves.

"They was a-settin' in the sun, enjoyin' it all, with their backs toward the coulée, when, all of a sudden and without a bit uh warnin', they each one of 'em got a blanket dropped over her head at the same instant.

"They couldn't holler none on account of them blankets, and it wouldn't ha' done 'em no good if they had, because nobody could ha' heard 'em.

"Well, seh, accordin' to Hilda's yarn, their arms were bound straight down along their sides, with the blankets still left over their heads, after which they were sot onto their hosses, and tied there, too.

"After that, Hilda says, they rode many hours in utter silence. She don't know how many hours it was, only that it was a good many, and she thinks they must have covered a big distance."

"Indians?" asked the detective.

"Wait. All the time during that ride, Hilda never heard the sound of a human voice. She tried to talk to Jessie, but the folds of the blanket prevented that, and, besides, the minute she uttered a sound a sharp blow that didn't hurt much came against the back of her head, and she didn't try it again."

"And then——"

"As I say, they rode a long time, and probably a big distance. At last they stopped. They were lifted from their horses and carried."

"How? And where?"

"I'm a-tellin' yeh. They was carried by the men who had captured them. They was packed along the side of a rocky wall that was damp, 'cos Hilda brushed against it two or three times, and she says she could smell the damp.

"Then they went up an awful incline, where the feller carryin' her seemed to cling with one hand, while he climbed up very steep steps and very high ones.

"Then they went along a level place for a ways; and then they begun to go down a windin' way, like a spiral staircase inside a cylinder, only that it seemed to her to be a path, instead of steps.

"She thought there was no end to that there goin' down, and she had begun to wonder if the outfit had started f'r China, by the shortest route, when they stopped.

"Hilda was sot down onto a couch covered with tanned skins and woven blankets of a pattern that she never seen before. The end of the rope that was wrapped around her and the blanket was placed in her hand—and that was all she knowed.

"She sat still for a long time, expected each minute that there'd be something doing—but there wasn't; and bimeby she got tired uh waitin', and begun to unwind that there rope herself.

"Nobody stopped her, and bimeby she got the thing off'n her, and then she threw the blanket off'n her head, and sot up and took notice."

The man from Montana ceased abruptly, fixing his clear eyes upon the face of the detective.

"Well?" said Nick.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"Certainly. Will you have a cigar?"

"No, thank you. Out on the range we don't have no cigars, and a pipe ain't always handy—besides, it's apt to be burned out when you want it most; so I jest roll my own cigarettes and smoke 'em."

"What did Hilda discover when she sat up and took notice?" asked the detective.

"I'm sure afraid that you won't believe me when I tell you," replied Tom Short.

"I will believe *you*. I won't promise to believe Hilda—at least, until I have seen her and talked with her myself. Do you believe all that she told you?"

"Every word of it."

"Very well, then; I will agree to give her the benefit of the doubt."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I will believe—or, at least, will try to—until I have good reason to doubt."

"That's a square deal, all right."

"What did she see?"

"She was in a room that, judging from her description, must ha' been about fourteen 'r sixteen feet square, and jest about as high as that, too."

"Well?"

"There was some kind of a woven blanket of bright colors on the floor, and——"

"A rug, probably."

"No; she said it wasn't a rug; leastwise, it wasn't like any rug she had ever seen before, and she has seen lots of 'em in the East. It was more like a big Navajo blanket, she said."

"All right. Go ahead."

"There was a queer kind of a table in the room, and two 'r three chairs that were jest as queer. That is, they were queer in shape and all covered with carvings of idols, and images, and things that she said made her think of the pictures of the Pyramids of Egypt."

The detective straightened up a trifle, and the interest deepened in his face.

"That is rather interesting," he said. "Tell me the rest."

"There wasn't any window to the room, but there was a funny kind of a lamp burnin' on the table."

"What kind of a lamp was it?"

"Well, Hilda said it looked like the saucer of a big

flower-pot, only that it was deeper. It didn't have no hole in the bottom of it, either; but, instead of that, there was a sort of a spike that stuck up straight from the center of it. That saucer was filled to the edges with some sort of oil, and there was a small round wick coiled in the oil and then wound around the spige, spiral fashion, all the way to the top, where it passed through a little hole and stuck up straight. The end of that wick was lighted."

"Tom," said the detective slowly, "you have described to me exactly the sort of lamp which the Spaniards found the Mexicans using at the time when Cortez conquered the Montezumas."

"Mebby I have. I don't know about it."

"And the furniture, also; and the other things, as well."

"Even if I have, that ain't the remarkable part of the story."

"What is the remarkable part of it?"

"The room itself."

"What about it?"

"It was jest solid gold, from top to bottom, and from one end to the other."

"I don't think I fully understand you."

"That ain't no wonder. I mean that the walls were gold, the ceiling was gold, the floor was gold. Yellow gold, jest like that ring you've got on your finger. The hull place was a chunk uh gold, and that room had been hollowed out of it. That's what I mean."

"It seems incredible, Tom."

"I know it does. That's what I said to Hilda—not in jest them words, mebby, but with that same idea."

"And she insisted that it was true?"

"Gospel true."

"What more?"

"There was a door at one side of the room. It was made of heavy, hard wood, and it was fastened, or locked, on the outside. It wasn't solid; it was sort uh open work, I take it, only on the outside there was some kind of a platted curtain, which prevented her from seeing through it."

"Well, is there anything more?"

"There's a hull lot more."

"Go ahead, then."

"Besides the lamp, there was food and water on the table a-plenty, and, being hungry, she ate some of it."

"Where was Jessie all this time?"

"She didn't know. She doesn't know now. She ain't sot eyes on Jessie since them blankets was throwed over their heads at the mouth of the coulée."

"She was all alone, then?"

"Stark livin' alone; yes."

"Didn't she see any of her jailers?"

"Not jest then. Later she did."

"Tell me about that."

"Well, she was purty tired, with her long ride that day, if it was still day, which she did not think it was; and bimeby she laid down on the couch and fell asleep. She must ha' slept sound, too, for while she was asleep somebody came into the room and took care of it, and when she woke up she found that more oil had been put in the saucer, more food and drink was on the table. There were three big gourds of water and a basin for her to wash in, and it seemed jest as if they was a-tryin' to make her feel as much to home as possible.

"But she made up her mind that they couldn't play it on her in that way again, so when she thought it was about time for another visit to her room she laid down on the couch and pretended to go to sleep."

"But kept awake, eh?"

"Not that time, she didn't. She went to sleep again, and her room was taken care of while she slept, jest as it had been before."

"Well?"

"Well, she tried it again and again, but always she went to sleep, until, finally, she jest left that food alone one time and pretended to sleep."

"And that time she kept awake?"

"Yep. There must ha' been something in the grub to make her sleep, for that time she kept awake; and after she had waited, and waited, and waited, she heard somebody at the door.

"Then she watched, and bimeby the door opened, and a little, shriveled-up old woman, who must ha' been nigh onto a hundred, came into the room and begun to get busy.

"That was the chance that Hilda wanted, you see.

"She jest up and slipped across that room, until she was between the old woman and the door. That's what she did."

## CHAPTER III.

### THE GUARDIANS OF THE TREASURE.

"Hilda jest sure headed the old lady off," continued Tom; "and the funny part of it was that the old one didn't know it until she happened to look up and discover Hilda standing there between her and the door.

"Then she let out a screech like a jackrabbit when it's wounded—you've heard 'em cry, ain't yeh? They do it f'r all the world like a baby—and Hilda says that, f'r a woman of her age, she was surprisin' agile.

"Anyhow, she got to that door, somehow, ahead of Hilda, and she went out, and closed it after her, without ever sayin' a word.

"Hilda says it was about an hour afterward when the door opened again, and a surprisin' old man came into the room. She says his face looked like a piece of tanned leather that's been servin' f'r a year 'r two on the seat

of a cowboy's pants. He didn't have no teeth at all, and his chin stuck out like it was the horn of a saddle.

"He was dressed funny, too—all in colors, like that thing on the floor, with pants that flared wide at the bottoms, like a greaser's; and his clothes were all bespangled with glittering things, which she thinks were jewels and precious stones.

"He had a sort of robe over his shoulders, which was fastened around his neck, and again around his waist, and which draped almost to the floor behind him, and he wore some kind of a tight-fitting cap on his head.

"He came into the room, and shut the door after him, and then he stood there, looking at her, for a long time without making a sound, until she begun to git scared.

"She thought he was trying to smile at her, but she ain't sure; and then, when she thought she'd have to let out a scream, he spoke to her.

"He used purty fair English, too, she said; and, as near as I can remember what Hilda told me, this is what he said:

"'Daughter, you are not to feel fear. You are in no danger. To-night, when the moon rises, you will be taken from here and returned, unharmed, to your people.'

"'But where is Jessie?' cried Hilda. 'Is she, also, safe, and will she be sent home, too?"

"'Your friend is safe. She will not be harmed. But her destiny does not point the same way as yours. In her veins flows the blood of my people, although she does not know it. She will remain here with us,' he replied.

"I don't know what Hilda said then. She doesn't remember, herself. She asked a lot of questions, which the old critter would not answer. He remained perfectly dumb until she had exhausted herself, and then he told her this:

"'To-night you will be returned to your people. You will tell them that your companion is in safe hands, that she will meet with no harm, that she will receive every care, that she already possesses more gold than all the known wealth of the world combined amounts to, and that it was written in the book of fate a thousand years before she was born that some day she should be brought here to this mountain to reign over the small remnant of her mother's people.

"'Tell them,' he went on, 'not to search for her, for they will not succeed in finding her. That will be impossible. Tell them to wait in patience, and that, years hence, when it shall be her pleasure to do so, she will make herself known to them again.'

"That was every blessed word he said, Nick.

"When he had finished with that, he just turned on his heel, and, before Hilda realized it, he was out of the room, and the door was closed and locked."

"And what happened then?" asked the detective.

"Well, she couldn't go forever without eating, and she wasn't at all sure that it was the fault of the food that she had not been able to keep awake before; and, besides, it tasted all right, so she ate a lot.

"Then she got drowsy, and she laid down and went to sleep—and, when she woke up, she knew by the feeling and the motion that she was on some kind of a litter, and that a couple of men were carrying it.

"She had no idea how far she had traveled in that way; but after a long time, knowing that she was awake, they took her from the litter and put her on the horse, where they fixed her as I have already described.

"She says it was about two hours after that when I found her."

"You haven't served out in the West all these years for nothing, have you, Tom?" asked the detective.

"I don't know jest what you mean by that question," was the reply.

"You know how to take a trail and follow it, don't you?"

"I sure do."

"Well, that trail must have been ordinarily fresh," said Nick.

"What trail?"

"The trail that the men who carried Hilda on the litter, and who afterward led the horse, must have left behind them."

"They didn't leave no trail behind them."

"They must have left some sort of a trail somewhere."

"I spent three 'r four days lookin' for it, and I couldn't find a trace of it, and I must have covered a hundred miles 'r more."

"And since that time what have you done?"

"Since that time I ain't done nothin' else but ride over them mountains and through them coulées, everywhere, a-lookin' fer my girl Jessie. I never let up a holy minute until I started East to find you; and there ain't no alfalfa growed under my feet since then, either, for it's hardly two hours yet since I struck this town.

"I jest jumped into a waggin that had two purty good-lookin' cayuses in front of it, and I says to the puncher on the seat, 'Do yeh happen to know where Nick Carter lives?'

"He said he didn't, and I told him to find out and take me there—which he proceeded to do. Now, yeh've got the yarn, as far as I know, Nick; what d'ye think of it?"

"It is a very remarkable tale."

"And that's no dream! Say!"

"Well?"

"I ain't got much money. I ain't a rich man, but I own the ranch now where I used to punch cows f'r a livin', and I reckon I can scrape up a little dust. What I mean to say is this: If you'll go back there to the Missouli country with me, and help me to find Jessie, and will stay there with me till she's found, or we know

what's become of her, you can have all I've got and all that I can borrow, besides."

"You are forgetting all about that mountain of gold, Tom," said the detective, smiling.

"That don't cut no hay in my pasture, seh! If we find the mountain of gold, 'r ten mountains of gold, you can have 'em. All I want is Jessie—and I want her dog-goned bad, seh!"

"Who told you about me, Tom?"

"One uh my punchers from down Nevada way. He uster know you, he said. Name uh Cal Huskins. Mebby yeh remember him, Nick?"

"Yes; I do. He will remember Chick, too."

"That's the feller who was here when I came in, eh?"

"Yes."

"He's all right. I could tie to that chap. But we're getting away from the question. What about that date you had in half an hour? Eh?"

"I did not say that I had an engagement. I said that I could give you half an hour."

"Oh! Well, what about goin' to Montana with me? As I said before, I'm worth about sixty thousand dollars, and you can have it all, and more——"

"You haven't got enough to pay me for such a trip," said the detective; and Tom Short's countenance fell; but it brightened at once when the detective added:

"However, I think I will go with you, without pay, Tom."

"Je-ru-sa-lum and buckin' pintos, Nick! Do you mean that?"

"Yes. I mean it."

"Will yeh jest shake on it, to sort uh bind the bargain? Not that I want yeh to go without pay—that ain't my way—but I want yeh to go."

"I'll go—if you will wait until to-morrow night before we start. I know you don't want to lose any time, but there are some things which I will have to attend to before I go. Would you mind punching that button there by your elbow, Tom?"

"What, this? I thought it was a target. I was tempted to pull my gun on it when I first came into the room. Bet yeh I could hit it at thirty paces, nine times out uh ten, Nick."

"I don't doubt it. But for the present content yourself with pressing your thumb against it for me."

It was only a moment after that when Joseph appeared, and Nick directed him to send Chick to them at once.

"Chick," he said, when the assistant came into the room, "there isn't anything on hand just now which Patsy and Ten-Ichi cannot attend to, is there?"

"Not a thing," was the reply.

"How would you like to take a vacation?"

"To Montana?"

"Yes."

"It would suit me down to the ground!"

"I think it would suit me, too. I haven't been in that country for a long time, and I believe that a few weeks in the mountains is just what I want. We will start to-morrow night."

"With our friend Rube?" asked Chick, with a sly twinkle in his eyes.

"Aw, git out, sonny!" laughed Tom Short. "I may be a Rube here, all right, and I reckon I am; but you wait till I git yeh out there in the Missoula country. I'll show yeh a thing 'r two that'll make yehr head swim!"

Chick turned again to his chief.

"What is it, Nick?" he asked. "A case?"

"Yes. A queer one, too. We are going in search of a mountain of gold."

"A mountain of—— Oh, rot!"

"And a young lady who is imprisoned in a cavern that is dug out of solid gold."

"Don't chaff, Nick!"

"I'm not chaffing. Isn't that the literal truth, Tom?"

"It sure is, Nick."

"Well," said Chick, "I have been all over the Missoula country, from top to bottom, and all along the edges, and I never saw or heard of any mountain of gold around there."

"Nor anybody else, Chick," said the detective. Then he added seriously:

"All the same, there seems to be something authentic about this. History tells us that centuries before the invasion of Mexico by Cortez, the whole western half of this continent was peopled by the Aztecs, or the Toltecs, or by a race of people who preceded them. They were civilized, and they were rich in gold and jewels. The mines of Mexico and Peru prove that."

"Well, what has that got to do with this affair?" asked Chick.

"From the description given me by Tom Short, I should say—if it were possible—that this expedition has to do with one of those old, prehistoric mines, and with that prehistoric race of people.

"If this mountain of gold and this cavern dug out of it does exist—if it does, mind you—I cannot suppose it to be other than some sacred mountain over which a guard has been maintained for centuries.

"Short has described the ancient Aztec tapestry work to me very well, indeed, and he does not know anything about it."

"I sure don't, and that's no dream!" said Tom.

"He has also described other things about the place which lead me to think that possibly we may be on the trail of a great discovery. At all events, I am going to take him at his word, and I am going out there to have a try at it; and you are going with me."

"To-morrow night, eh?"

"To-morrow night—yes!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### A MYSTERY OF THE MOUNTAINS.

They left the train on the Northern Pacific Railroad at a place called Vermillion, in Montana, and from there they crossed the Bitter Root Mountains by way of the Middle Pass to Murray, in Idaho.

It was a long and tedious climb up the mountain, and an equally long ride down it on the western side, but Nick believed it was advisable to make their headquarters at Murray, and also to make their actual start from there.

"You know, Tom," he said to his cowboy friend, "this is not detective work at all. In this particular chase, I am no better than any other man would be, and perhaps not half so good as an old trapper, or a frontiersman who knows this country."

"Yes, you are," insisted Tom Short. "It doesn't make any difference what you say, I am convinced, after what Cal Huskins said, that you are just the man for this search. And, besides, didn't you drop to the true inwardness of the thing right away? Didn't you catch onto how it might be that the men who stole my girl are Aztecs, or something like that?"

"But that was only guesswork, presupposing that all that Hilda told you was absolutely true."

"You can bank on it that it was true, all right, Nick. Hilda hasn't told me any lies. You will see that for yourself when you have talked with her."

"I hope so."

"And then there's another thing."

"What is that?"

"The fact is that nobody round here will believe it. They think that Hilda's dreaming. They don't take no stock in the story at all. I couldn't git any of the old miners or one of the old scouts to go a-huntin' for that mountain, because they don't believe in it. They think that Hilda is loco."

"You can't blame them much for that, can you?"

"No; I s'pose not."

After their arrival at Murray, and after he had taken a good rest, Nick sought the opportunity to talk with Hilda Hart.

He found her to be a young woman in her twentieth year, and possessed of unusual intelligence, so as soon as they were alone together he at once broached the subject.

"I suppose Tom has told you why I am here, Hilda?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I knew when he went after you."

"He has told me a remarkable tale about your adventure. Would you mind telling it to me again, in your own way?"

"What is it that you particularly wish to know about?" she asked modestly.

"I want the whole story, from beginning to end. Perhaps we can get at it better if I ask you a few questions."

"I think we can, sir."

"Could you, for instance, take me to the spot where you were first attacked?"

"Certainly I could."

"At the mouth of the coulée?"

"Yes."

"How far is it from here?"

"I don't know exactly, but I should say about twenty miles."

"Had you ever been there before?"

"Often."

"Had you ever been there before with Jessie?"

"No; it was the first time we had ridden so far together."

"You were eating your luncheon at the time you were attacked?"

"Yes."

"And Tom tells me you had no idea that anybody was near you until the blankets were thrown over your heads. Is that correct?"

"Perfectly."

"From that moment to this he says you have not seen Jessie."

"That is correct."

"Nor heard the sound of her voice?"

"No."

"What did you do when the blanket was thrown over you?"

"Nothing. I could do nothing. I was helpless."

"Didn't you try to scream?"

"Naturally. But I could not make much noise. The blanket stopped that."

"It is your impression, of course, that Jessie was served in the same way, isn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Did you not hear any voices at all around you?"

"Not a sound."

"The men who had captured you were absolutely silent, were they?"

"Absolutely."

"How long was it after the blanket was thrown over you before you were placed on the horse and taken away?"

"Immediately."

"You were lifted to the horse's back, of course?"

"Yes."

"Now, when one person lifts another in the arms, the one who is lifted gets a pretty fair idea of the stature and physique of the other party. You weigh, I should judge, close upon a hundred and forty pounds."

"One hundred and thirty-five."

"I made a fairly good guess. Was the person who lifted you tall, or short?"

"I haven't the least idea in the world, sir."

"It was a man, of course."

"I suppose so."

"Was he muscular, do you think? Did he lift you with apparent ease, or was it an effort?"

"I was lifted from the ground as if I were a babe in arms. The man took hold of me as if I were a child."

"Which suggests that he was tall and very strong, doesn't it?"

"Probably it does."

"And after that were there no sounds of conversation, even in whispers, on the part of your captors?"

"Not one."

"You mean that they rode in perfect silence all the time after that?"

"Yes."

"They *did* ride, did they not? I mean, are you sure that your captors had horses?"

She turned to him quickly.

"I had not thought of it before," she said to him; "but now that it is brought to my attention, I don't think they did ride. I think they were afoot."

"And you speak in the plural, as if you were sure that there were several in the party."

"I am. I think there were three or four, or possibly more."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"I don't know. I couldn't tell you. It is only an impression."

"You are not one who gets rattled very easily, are you, Hilda?"

"No, sir."

"You are not easily frightened; eh?"

"I am not."

"And you ought to be a fairly good judge of the passage of time. People who live in a country of this kind, and who pass more or less time in the saddle, usually are."

"Yes; I think so."

"Now, how long was it, should you think, from the time you were attacked, until you arrived at your destination? I mean, until you were taken from the horse?"

"Five or six hours; possibly more than that; certainly no less."

"Your horse must have been very tired before you were taken from his back."

"He was fairly staggering under me."

"What gait was the horse compelled to take during that ride?"

"What we call out here, a fox-trot."

"Up-grade, or down?"

"Up-grade all the time."

"You could, of course, hear the other horse near you all that time? I mean, the horse that Jessie rode?"

"No, I could not. I did not hear it once."

"But the blanket was not so thick but what you could have heard it had it been near you, was it?"

"I don't think so. I don't think the horse she rode was near me at all."

"What was your impression at the time as to what had become of her?"

"I thought that she was on the same trail, either in advance of us, or some distance behind us."

"And who, according to your impression, did you think had captured you?"

"I think that I believed them to be outlaws of some kind who had taken us for ransom, although that sort of thing is unknown here. But I was sure they were not Indians."

"Indeed! Why were you so sure of that?"

"I can smell an Indian, Mr. Carter. They were not Indians; I am sure of that."

"Still, the old man whom you saw later looked like an Indian, didn't he?"

"He did, and he did not. He was not an Indian as I know Indians."

"What should you say he was?"

"He looked more like an Egyptian mummy than anything else."

"Now, after you were taken from the horse, you had to walk some distance, did you not?"

"Yes."

"And was then carried a considerable way—up steep steps?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea of the distance you traveled in that manner?"

"Several miles, I should say."

"And then—what?"

"Then we entered a place which I knew by the feeling, and by the air I breathed, was under the ground. I can't tell you exactly how I knew that so well, only that an indescribable impression took possession of me which told me as plainly as words could have done that I was in some sort of a cavern, or a mine, or an excavation."

"I know the feeling, and it is unmistakable."

"Isn't it! We walked a long distance after that, for I was put on the ground again."

"Tell me about that walk."

"It was like passing through the corridors of a great building where the floor is of stone or cement, and where rugs have been placed along at frequent intervals, leaving spaces between them, so that often your foot strikes upon the bare floor. You know that feeling, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was it."

"All the while I suppose the rope was wound around you, binding your arms to your sides?"

"Yes."

"Did one of your captors have hold of you?"

"Two. One on either side. They guided me through that strange place and into the room where I was afterward a prisoner."

"And left you there, in silence?"

"And left me there in utter silence, with one end of the rope in my hand. It was not until a considerable time afterward that it occurred to me to try to free myself; and when I did so, I was alone, and locked in—alone in a room the walls of which were solid gold; where even the funny little lamp was a disk of solid gold," she replied.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE PROBABLE FATE OF JESSIE.

"Did you discover these facts at once?" asked the detective.

"No; not at first. My first impression was that the interior of the room where I was confined had been painted a reddish yellow."

"Were you frightened?"

"Naturally. I did not know what fate held in store for me. But I was not terrorized."

"You mean that you were alarmed, that you realized that you were in danger, but that, nevertheless, you remained perfectly cool. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about the furnishings of that room—about the rug on the floor, and the blanket on the couch, I mean."

"Have you ever seen a Navajo blanket, Mr. Carter?"

"I have seen many of them."

"You know how beautiful they are? And how exquisitely they are made?"

"Yes."

"Well, those in that room were many times finer and much more beautiful than the most perfect Navajo I ever saw. And I, too, have seen many. I examined them critically after a little while; after I had somewhat recovered my composure, and, remembering how I had been treated thus far, I endeavored to convince myself that I was at least in no immediate danger. Besides, there was food on the table, and the room itself was supplied with conveniences which compelled me to conclude that my captors were at least civilized."

"I see."

"My father, when he lived, was a collector of tapestries and rugs and blankets. He searched for them all over the world. One side of them was all we had left after his death; but, as a child, I was interested in his work, or hobby, it was called, and I know something about such things."

"And what, then, should you say these were?"

"I do not know. They were like nothing that I ever saw or heard of before. Very old, very unique. Very strange."

"And they reminded you—of what?"

"Some of the Egyptian and Persian weaving I have seen; only finer."

"What about the furniture in the room?"

"It was as strange as the fabrics; like nothing I had ever seen or heard of before."

"Tom tells me that there were carvings upon it."

"Yes; hieroglyphic carvings. The wood was ebony. I know that much. Each article of furniture was profusely decorated with gold, also."

"The little lamp with its strange wick, Tom has already described, save that he did not state that the basin was of gold."

"Everything was of gold in that place; I mean, of course, that it was the only metal I saw there."

"When did you discover that the walls of your room, and the ceiling and floor, were also gold?"

"After I had examined the lamp. I remembered then that the walls were yellow, and I examined them."

"Now, tell me how they appeared. Did it look as if the gold had been put on there, or as if the room had been actually excavated out of solid gold?"

"I think there can be no doubt whatever as to that question, Mr. Carter."

"How do you answer it?"

"The room has literally been carved out of a mountain of gold, and I have no doubt that the entire cavern I traversed is the same. My own opinion is—— But I forget."

"Please go on. It is your opinion and your impression that I most desire, just at present, Miss Hilda."

"I have already told you that I was somewhat of a student with my father."

"Yes."

"His researches naturally led him into much history, and much that was ancient history."

"I can understand that."

"In studying up the origin of the Navajo blanket, for instance, I found that it was the relic of a lost art—or a partly lost art. That the Navajos themselves were supposed to be the descendants of a superior race of people who once lived on what is now the great plains. All that, of course, takes us into the romance surrounding the continent of Atlantis, but it always interested me."

"Yes. Well, now, what is your opinion? You have not expressed it yet."

"I get it as much from the two people I saw there, whom I have not described as yet, as from my other impressions."

"I understand. I will ask you about those people later."

"Well, I think that that mountain was excavated many centuries before the dawn of our present history. I believe that mountain to be a mass of solid gold which has been stored there by volcanic action. I believe that, without doubt, many centuries were passing while that gold was being removed. I think, if history could tell us the truth about it, that we would find that the mountain of gold once belonged to the reigning kings, or rulers of this great country, and that the people who are there now are the literal and lineal descendants of the guardians over that treasure."

"All this is very interesting, Miss Hilda. Please go on. That is not all you believe about it, is it?"

"By no means."

"Tell me the rest."

"The question naturally arises, how could such a family be kept in existence through all the centuries, when all the rest of the race had died out, or had degenerated into our present Indian?"

"Quite true."

"I think, Mr. Carter, that my experience is the answer to that question."

"How so, Miss Hilda?"

"I only wonder that I was permitted to depart."

"I don't understand you," said the detective.

She was silent a moment, and then she said:

"That old man that I saw there doubtless has sons and grandsons possibly great grandsons. He certainly looked old enough."

"Well?"

"Perhaps the keepers of that treasure-mountain wanted a wife for the great-grandson, in order that the family might be perpetuated, and in order that the mountain of gold would never cease to have a guardian," said Hilda quietly.

The detective started to his feet.

"Miss Hilda," he said, "you have hit the nail on the head this time."

"We will say," she continued, "that the guardianship of that mountain is a religious mania with them. We will suppose that they have a legend that some day the royal owner will return to inquire how well his servants have fulfilled their orders."

"Yes."

"The religious mania and the belief in the legend descends from father to son through all the generations and all the centuries that come and go."

"It is a wonderful idea, Hilda."

"Each child that is born there undergoes an education for his duties, let us say. He is imbued with the religious zeal of his progenitors, from the cradle until he is old enough and strong enough to undertake his life's work."

"But the mother!" said Nick. "Suppose that Jessie were stolen away for that purpose—to become the wife of one of those men there; she could not be made to forget. She would teach her children——"

"Ah! You forget, Mr. Carter, the estimation in which a woman was held centuries ago when the gold was dug out of that mountain."

"True."

"They were not thought even to be possessed of souls. They were only here to bear children. Man was the lord of creation and woman was his slave."

"Quite true."

"And if it should be Jessie's fate to fulfil the prophecy I have made, if she should wed with one of the descendants of the guardian of the treasure, she would never be permitted to teach her child or her children anything at all. She would be sacrificed the moment she had fulfilled her mission, as they see it."

"I believe you are right, Hilda."

"I feel that I am right."

"Even if we find her——"

"I do not believe that we will ever find her, Mr. Carter. I think of her now as one who is dead. I pray that while she lives she may not be made to suffer."

"We must not give up hope."

"I have never hoped, since the moment I came from that cavern of gold. I know that it is hidden away where nobody can find it. I feel that it is lost to us, and that Jessie, being there, is in her tomb. I have only one solace."

"What is that?"

"It was a kindly old man who talked to me. He had a heart, somewhere in that shriveled old body of his. There was still a kindly expression in his fading eyes. He was sorry for me; he was also sorry for Jessie. I am convinced of that.

"But the rules which govern his life are, as far as he is concerned, inexorable. It was her fate—her destiny, as he regarded it—that Jessie should link her life with one of his descendants in order to perpetuate his family.

"But I think he meant that she should be kindly and considerately treated. He gave me that impression. He even said as much. It is horrible that she should meet such a fate; and yet there have been worse, outside of mountains of gold."

"We will find her, Miss Hilda," said the detective, rising and standing in front of her.

She shook her head negatively.

"I cannot think so," she replied.

"Have you the requisite courage to go on this journey with Tom, and my assistant, and me?" asked Nick, turning toward her again.

"Could I aid you?" she asked, in return.

"I think so."

"How?"

"Your woman's intuition, for one thing. The fact that

you have actually been over the ground once already, for another."

"I was blindfolded."

"We will blindfold you again, and you shall lead us in that way."

"It would be literally a case of the blind leading the blind, would it not?"

"Yes; but in a case of this kind you could see better with blindfolded eyes than with them wide open."

"I have never heard of such an idea before."

"I have. I once knew of a political prisoner who was kept in the prison of San Juan de Ulua at Vera Cruz, for seventeen years, in the dark. After he was liberated, he attained prominence, and finally was in a position where he could return to that prison as a visitor. He wished to see his old cell with a light in his hand.

"Believe me, it was totally strange to him; but after a moment he sent his companions away with the light, and at once, in the dark, it all became real to him again. He knew how to put his finger upon any spot of the four walls. With the light, none of those spots were there. You can lead us, I think, Hilda. If Jessie is found, it will be through your aid."

"Then I will aid you. I will go with you. You shall blindfold me, and if I can lead you to the mountain of gold I will do so."

"Thank you, Hilda," said Nick. "We will start at daylight to-morrow."

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE TRAIL THROUGH THE CANON.

The party, as it started out from Murray in the morning, consisted of Nick Carter, Chick, Tom Short, Cal Hawkins—who had been summoned from Tom's ranch, two hundred miles away—and Hilda.

They took three packhorses with them, and these were loaded with provisions and the general outfit for such an expedition.

In addition, there was a large shelter-tent, for the men of the party, and a heavy canvas A-tent with buttoned flaps for Hilda's special use.

It was decided, also, that in order not to attract attention to the fact that there was a woman in the party, Hilda should dress in a buckskin suit of masculine garb; and, so arrayed, with her broad-brimmed hat set jauntily on one side of her head, she looked a very charming lad indeed.

Her mother was at first loath to let her go with the party, but Tom Short had for years been almost as much of a father to her as to Jessie, and the entire personnel of the party was such that, for Jessie's sake, she was moved to consent; and so, soon after daylight, they set out for the mountains, traveling almost due north along the trail that had been followed by the two girls the day of the capture.

Something more than twenty miles out they came to the mouth of the coulée where the two girls had dismounted to bait their horses and to eat their own luncheon, and Hilda at once signified that this was the place.

"I suppose," said Nick to Tom, as he leaped from his horse to the ground, "that you have nosed around here half a dozen times already, looking for a trail, haven't you?"

"More than that, I reckon," was the reply.

"All the same, you might all dismount and let the horses breathe for awhile, while I look around a bit."

They had traveled rapidly and the time was yet early in the forenoon.

After Nick's remark, he paid no further attention to the party, but, tossing his bridle to Chick, walked away up the coulée, which, as it ascended, gradually developed into a cañon.

The reader must not forget that considerably more than three months had already elapsed since the disappearance of Jessie, and, therefore, it will be understood that Nick Carter did not expect to discover any sort of a trail that might have been left by the persons who had attacked the girls.

In fact, he really did not expect to find anything at all. He was merely looking over the ground as a matter of habit.

But he had not gone half a mile from the party before he did find something.

He saw it glistening among the rocks at one side of the trail, and he secured it.

It was a button made of gold. A button of the size of a silver quarter, and there were three holes punched through the middle of it, while still clinging to it was a piece of buckskin, of the size of a leather shoe-string, with which it had originally been fastened to a garment.

The detective regarded the article earnestly for a moment. Then he remarked to himself:

"This seems at least to bear out the stories I have been told. People who can afford to hammer ordinary buttons out of fifteen or twenty dollars' worth of gold certainly must have the yellow metal to spare."

He dropped the button into his pocket, and continued on up the cañon; but, although he walked nearly two miles farther, he saw nothing else to attract him, save that the cañon became visibly wider and more gloomy as he proceeded,

When, later, he returned to the others of his party, he called Hilda aside, and he said to her:

"Hilda, you forgot to tell me that the old man with whom you talked, in the cavern of gold, wore big, round, gold buttons on his garments; buttons that looked as though they had been manufactured with a hammer, and

which were fastened to the garments with buckskin thongs."

"Did I forget to tell you that?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then how did you know about it?"

"We will say that I dreamed it; but it is true, isn't it?"

"Yes. Quite true."

"You remember that you noticed such buttons, do you?"

"Yes. Particularly where the cape that I have described to you was fastened to his shoulders."

"Do you suppose you could recognize one of those same buttons, if you should happen to see one again?"

"I am sure of it."

"Then look at this one and tell me if it is one of the same kind."

He took the gold button from his pocket and gave it into her hand; and at once she exclaimed:

"It is the same, and it is not the same."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Nick.

"Those that I saw on the garments of the old man of the cave were not so great in circumference, and they were rounder than this one. This is flatter and it is larger."

"But, in other respects, you think it is the same, do you not?"

"Unquestionably. Where did you get this, Mr. Carter?"

"I found it, up the coulée, just before it develops into a cañon; and that reminds——"

"Where one of my captors must have lost it, you think?"

"Without doubt."

"You were about to make some remark about the cañon, weren't you?"

"Yes. Were you conscious of the fact that you passed into and along a deep cañon?"

"I think so."

"Don't you know whether they started up the coulée or not, after you were made prisoner?"

"I was too greatly frightened just at that time to notice anything," she replied.

The detective was silent a moment, and then he said:

"I see that Tom is letting the horses feed. I think it would be well if we took something to eat ourselves. Don't you?"

"To tell you the truth, I am as hungry as the proverbial bear," Hilda admitted.

"Then I will ask you to seat yourself in the exact spot and in the exact position that you occupied when you were here with Jessie," said Nick.

"I seated myself on that rock," she said, pointing with her finger. "Jessie sat there," and she pointed again.

"Very good. Now, if you will assume as nearly as you can the exact position and attitude you were in at that time, I will serve you with something to eat. But first let me complete the stage setting. Chick, come here!"

Chick came at once.

"Now, Hilda," continued the detective, "please tell Chick exactly where and how Jessie was seated at that time; and try to think of him as being Jessie, if you can."

She indicated the position which Chick was to occupy, and presently they were all eating together merrily.

But when the repast was nearly finished, Nick arose, and, stepping back out of the range of Hilda's vision, he motioned to Tom and Cal to follow him.

They did so, without attracting the attention of Hilda or Chick; and then Nick, who had already provided himself with a blanket for his purposes, stepped softly behind the girl and, with a suddenness which she could not have anticipated, he threw the blanket over her head, lifted her to her feet, wrapped his lasso several times around her body, binding her arms to her sides, and otherwise treated her as nearly as he could, from the description, exactly as she had been treated at the time of her capture.

Hilda screamed when the blanket fell, as she must have cried out that other time.

The whole thing was so real that for an instant she forgot that she was surrounded by friends, and she afterward admitted that, for a moment, she believed that the entire party had been surrounded and captured, as she and Jessie had been.

Nick still held her by the arms; and now he said to her:

"Hilda, carry your mind back to that other day."

"Yes. I will try."

"Was the horse brought to you, or were you carried to the horse?"

"The horse was brought to me."

Nick motioned to Huskins to bring Hilda's horse to them.

"Were you lifted to his back on the off side, or on the nigh side?" he asked her then.

"The nigh side," she replied instantly.

"Had you been riding with a side-saddle, or astride?"

"Astride."

With a quick motion the detective lifted her into the saddle.

"You can see nothing, can you?" he asked her then.

"Absolutely nothing."

"Is the effect of the blanket over your head about the same as it was then?"

"Almost precisely the same, only that the other one smelled of spices. This one does not."

"Point with your finger, if you can, the direction you

think you were taken, when you started away from here."

"You forget that my arms are tied and that I cannot point."

"You can point with your finger. I did not ask you to use your whole arm."

She moved the first finger of her right hand and pointed with it; and it pointed directly up the coulée.

"I have great hopes of you," said the detective. "Now, listen to me."

"Yes."

"We will proceed together in absolute silence. Chick and I will walk close beside you, Tom and Cal will come along in the rear with our horses. As we go, I wish you to tell me if we are proceeding too fast, or too slow, for I wish to attain as nearly as possible the same speed that carried you then."

"Yes."

"I shall not speak to you unless you speak to me; and I do not wish you to speak to me unless it is to suggest something of importance relative to this expedition."

"Very well."

"Carry your mind back to that day."

"Yes."

"I have figured so that we start from here at about the same time you did when you were captured. That was a clear day and this is one, and, it being about the same hour in the day, you will have about the same atmospheric conditions."

"It is a remarkable test, Mr. Carter."

"Take your mind back to that time. Try to figure out the time that elapses, just as you must have tried to do then."

"I will."

"If, at any point as we proceed, it seems to you that we are going wrong, or if it occurs to you that your horse was guided in either direction to the side at any place, let me know your impressions at once."

"I will."

"And, remember, *silence* is the rule."

"Yes."

"It will be a hard ride for you, Hilda, but I am convinced that much depends upon it."

"I will do my best, Mr. Carter."

"I am sure of that. Remember, if you become fatigued, that it is for Jessie's sake."

"I will not forget."

"I wish to travel in this manner, if possible, as nearly the exact distance you covered on that day as it can be done."

"Yes. I understand."

And so they started forward up the coulée in utter silence.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE RIDE THROUGH THE NIGHT.

Hour after hour they continued on in this way, without a word being spoken at all.

Nick Carter walked at the left side of the horse's head, leading the animal. Chick walked at the right.

But although the detective held the rein of the bridle in his grasp he made no effort to guide the horse at all, for he had taken another precaution in setting out on this expedition; he had insisted upon Hilda's riding the same horse she had ridden at that time; the horse that had carried her after she was captured; the horse to which she had been bound when she was taken back almost to her home and left there.

Horses are sagacious creatures—much more so than the average man realizes.

Moreover, they are primarily creatures of habit!

Given the same conditions, and the same surroundings, they will inevitably do the same things, follow the same trails, or roads, and otherwise comport themselves exactly as they have done at some previous time.

The detective relied greatly upon this fact.

He believed that if the horse were led forward on that same trail under precisely the same conditions that had obtained at the time of Hilda's capture, he would follow almost in the footprints of that particular journey; and hence it was more on account of the horse that Nick insisted upon this test of silence than because he believed that Hilda herself could materially aid him.

And now the horse—Pompous was his name, by the way—was traveling under exactly the same conditions that he had done that other time.

He had started from the same spot; he was carrying the same weight. The start had been made at, or nearly at, the same hour. He was following the same trail. He was surrounded by the same deathlike silence, and—before they had gone half a mile they were traveling at the same speed.

For when they started, Hilda said to them three times, at intervals:

"Faster! Faster! Faster!"

The result was that very soon Pompous had assumed his favorite fox-trot, while Nick and his assistant were trotting along on either side of him, with their elbows pressed closely against their sides.

Nick smiled grimly to himself when he remembered that he had told Hilda that it would be a hard ride for her; he began to think that it was going to be a particularly hard run for him and for Chick.

Afterward, he was often heard to say that he never fully realized how much real endurance he possessed until he took that run, for the pace was kept up hour after hour, with never a slacking of the gait, with never the suggestion of a stop, and with that steady persistency for which the Indians are justly celebrated.

The day lengthened into afternoon; the afternoon into evening; the evening into night, and still it was continued with never a halt or a slackening of the pace until even Nick Carter began to feel that there must be an end to it soon, or he would drop in his tracks.

And all this time there was never a word uttered by any of them.

All this time the horse, Pompous, fox-trotted along as unconcerned and apparently as sure of his route as if he had been in the habit of traveling it every day of his life.

Nick knew that Tom and Cal, with the horses, had long since been left far in the rear; but he also knew that they would follow on doggedly to the end.

The detective had, before starting, torn into small bits some papers that he had in his pockets, and it had been agreed between them that if at any point he left the direct trail he would scatter the papers on the ground, to indicate the direction he had taken.

Long since, the coulée had deepened into a cañon, and this latter had dived deeper into the mountains, until now the precipices rose hundreds of feet on either side of them as they advanced.

But they were nowhere abrupt.

The cañon was wide at the top, and the sides of it were almost treeless, so that the full moon that had risen over the world lighted their way for them.

At last, when Nick believed that the time was approaching midnight, Hilda spoke to Nick, in a tone so low that it was almost a whisper.

"We are getting near the end, I think," she said. "The horse should come to a walk presently, and we should ascend a very steep grade."

Nick made no reply.

He could not spare the breath, for one reason, and for the other, he noticed that the horse had already pricked up his ears and seemed to be looking for something along the sides of the cañon.

Fifteen minutes later he discovered what it was.

Pompous suddenly stopped the steady tick-a-tock-a trot and came down to a walk, and Nick purposely left the reins perfectly slack.

A hundred feet farther on, Pompous turned abruptly to the right, toward what appeared to be a black hole in the side of the cliff; and he walked deliberately into it and through it for a hundred yards or more, at length emerging once more into the light of the moon.

The detective understood, then, that they had passed out of the main cañon and thence through a fissure in the rocks, so narrow at the top as to be almost a cavern.

It had broadened as they proceeded, and while the cañon they were now traversing was not nearly so large as the other one—the main one—it was none the less a cañon; a branch of the greater one.

And here, too, was the steep grade to which Hilda had referred.

They went up and up and up until it seemed as if the hill would never end.

Their route was circuitous now, and presently they came out again upon a narrow trail which ran along the sheer side of the precipice hundreds of feet above the bottom and along the sides of the greater cañon they had first traveled.

More miles were covered in this way, when again the horse turned to the right.

Again he passed through a narrow opening in the rocks—this time narrower than before.

Again they came out upon a wider space, where the moonlight shone upon them; again they ascended a steep grade.

The detective was thoroughly glad that he had thought to provide himself with the torn papers, for otherwise he knew that Tom and Cal could never have succeeded in following them.

He doubted even if they would have seen the place where the grand cañon had been left behind; he was sure that they would deliberately have passed the second turn—the one which led off from the trail that ran along the side of the precipice.

But the papers would guide them.

He had dropped them in the right places, and Tom's quick eye would discover them.

The horse was tired, but he kept on doggedly, as if he knew exactly how far he had to go, and also, Nick thought, as if he realized that he was almost at the end of the journey.

Chick was never so nearly used up in his life as he was then; but he was determined that he would drop dead in his tracks before he would give up.

Nick was in almost as bad a condition; but he was also determined.

And then, when it seemed to both of the men as if they could not take another step, the horse led them suddenly through a narrow space between the rocks, and they emerged, so abruptly that it startled them, upon a wide, open valley, table-land, or plain, or whatever one might be pleased to call it, where the moon rendered everything almost as light as day itself, after the gloom of their route.

And here Pompous stopped.

He raised his head, pricked up his ears, and would have whinnied had not the detective seized him by the nostrils and smothered the sound before it came forth.

He saw the cause of it, too; for away out across the grass of that plain—it was a cup in the mountains, with high peaks towering on every side of it, and the grassy plain was itself about two miles in diameter—away out almost in the middle of that circular space, the dete tive

saw, in the moonlight, another, and a solitary, horse grazing.

The wind, fortunately—at least, such air as was stirring—was blowing toward them from the direction of that other horse, so that, while Pompous was fully aware of the fact that another of his kind was near at hand, the other horse had as yet no idea of their proximity.

"We have come as far as the horse can take us," said Nick. "Can you help Hilda from the saddle, Chick, while I keep this horse from whinnying? Get that rope and the blanket off of her as quickly as possible. Then wrap her in the blanket and let her lie flat on her back on the ground for awhile."

"I am not so *very* tired," she said weakly. "You must be almost dead with your long run."

"Dead?" said Chick, with a chuckle, as he lifted her to the ground. "I died three hours ago. This is only my ghost that's here now."

"Chick," said the detective, interrupting.

"Yes?"

"Give Hilda a swallow of brandy from your flask. Then come here and hold this horse for me. Watch him, so that if he tries to whinny, you can stop it. We don't know how near listening ears might be to us."

"All right. Here I am. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going out there to catch that other horse—if I can."

"Eh? What for?"

"Because I've got a hunch that it is the horse that Jessie rode. I think it is her horse. Anyhow, I want to make sure; and we have got to get the two horses together so they won't be whinnying and raising Cain around here."

"Do you really think it can be Jessie's horse?" asked Hilda.

"I hope it is," replied the detective.

"If it should be," continued Hilda, "his name is Don, and he knows his name perfectly well. Wait, Mr. Carter."

"Well?"

"If it is Don, he knows me. He will know my voice."

"Well?"

"He would come to me if I called his name. He would come at once. Let me go with you."

"Are you able to do so?"

"Perfectly."

"Come along, then. I will take the rope, so if it should happen not to be Don I can perhaps trip him and catch him just the same."

Hilda rose painfully to her feet, and stood for a long time watching the distant horse, which was still grazing peacefully, all unconscious of the proximity of mankind; and the moonlight shone full upon him.

"It is Don," she said quietly, at last. "I know him. I recognize him."

"Are you positive about it, Hilda?" asked Nick.

"Entirely so. Let me go after him alone."

"Why?"

"Because he knows me. He knows my voice. He will come to me like a pet dog the moment he hears me."

"He may not recognize you in that costume, Hilda," said Nick, smiling.

She blushed in the moonlight, but replied:

"He will know my voice, no matter what I wear. I may go?"

"Yes."

Hilda made a picture, indeed, as she moved out across that grassy plain in the moonlight, in her masculine, cowboy costume, with the broad-brimmed hat set jauntily on her curls, which covered her shoulders, and with the lasso in her hand, ready for use if she should need it.

And Chick, at Pompous' head, holding the bridle, and with his left hand resting on the animal's soft muzzle, and Nick standing a little at one side, smiling at the scene, completed the foreground of the picture.

Beyond was the stretch of grassy plain, with the high peaks towering over it, and, in the midst of this, the grazing horse.

Nick Carter never forgot that scene, and its beauty; neither did Chick.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE HORSE DETECTIVE.

Pompous could not understand why he was not permitted to nibble at the grass after his long and arduous journey. Neither could he comprehend why he was not permitted to call a note of recognition to his mate.

But he stood quietly, for all that, and waited, as did the two men, in silence.

Hilda succeeded in approaching quite near to the grazing horse before the animal suspected her presence.

But then he raised his head suddenly, and would have uttered a snort and run away quickly had not Hilda called out to him, in a voice that was only just loud enough to reach his ears.

"Don!" she called. "Don! Come here, Don! Good boy! Come here, Don."

He whinnied softly, scarcely louder than Hilda had spoken. He raised his head higher and put his ears forward until they seemed to point directly at her; and she called again:

"Don! Come, Don! Come here, boy. Good Don! Come here, Don!"

He was no longer in doubt. He knew that voice, and he knew it well.

He had listened for it, and for another one, for a long time now, without ever once hearing either of them. He was in a strange place, far away from the

scenes to which he was accustomed, and here was a suggestion of home coming to him out of the night, when he had least expected it; possibly after he had long since given up hope of seeing his home again.

He started forward, and then stopped hesitatingly.

The figure before him was strange to him. He had not seen that person before, he thought.

But then the voice came to him again, softly, soothingly, tenderly, enticingly.

"Don! Old fellow! Don't you know me? Come, Don!" it said.

He started forward again.

He approached within a few yards of where Hilda stood—and then he stopped.

"Don, boy, come here!" she said then, stamping her foot upon the grass, and speaking with a certain imperiousness that was one of her characteristics.

Don knew that gesture, if he did not understand the costume. He recognized the expression of that small foot when it stamped the grass, even if he did not recognize the clothes; and he was positive about the voice.

He hesitated no longer.

He trotted forward at once, and this time he did not pause until Hilda had her arms around his neck and was kissing his soft, velvety nose rapturously.

He would have whinnied aloud in his delight had Hilda not cautioned him; but her soft command, "Be silent, Don!" was one that he obeyed, for he understood it thoroughly.

With a spring as agile as a deer's, Hilda leaped upon his bare back, and then with her knees she guided him toward where Nick and Chick and Pompous were awaiting them, patting his sleek neck softly the while.

And the two horses, as soon as they perceived and recognized each other, put their cool muzzles together and held them there, for all the world as if they were whispering confidences about the three months that had passed since they parted.

"Don is telling Pompous all about it," said Hilda, laughing happily. "I wish he could tell us, too."

"So do I," replied Nick. "But we must not forget that he has already told us one important thing."

"That we are on the right trail, you mean?"

"Yes; and not very far from the end of it."

"That is true. I feel quite happy now. Finding Don has rested me."

"I wish it had rested me," said Chick. "What are you going to do now, Nick?"

"Picket the two horses after I have led Pompous back into the cañon to a spring I saw a little way back. He must be almost parched. I know I am."

"And then——"

"Then—I am going to wrap myself up in the moonlight and go to sleep; and you two had better do the same."

"It is half-past two o'clock," said Chick, looking at his watch; but Nick was already leading the horses to water.

Chick made a pillow for Hilda of the saddle that was taken from Pompous' back, after which he wrapped her in the blanket from head to foot and commanded her to sleep; and when Nick returned, fifteen minutes later, they were both oblivious to all surroundings, for the night was warm and Chick was too tired to care whether he was cold or not.

Nor was the detective long in following his example, so that presently the three were sleeping there under the waning moon and the stars as soundly and as well as if they had been tucked away upon the softest of beds.

Nevertheless, with the first suggestion of daylight, Nick Carter stirred. Then he opened his eyes and looked around him. Then he sat up and continued to look; and then it all came back to him with a rush.

He roused the others, and then, perceiving where a spur of the mountains jutted out upon the grassy plain, almost making a cove behind it, he led them there and told them to make themselves comfortable.

"We are sheltered here," he said. "If any of the inhabitants of that cavern of gold should happen to come out on the plain, we would not be seen."

"But Don would be missed," suggested Chick.

"I only hope that he will be missed," replied Nick grimly.

"You do? Why?" asked Hilda.

"Because if he is missed, somebody is likely to go in search of him."

"Well? And then——"

"Why, they would not be likely to send more than one individual to look for the horse—or two, at the most."

"I don't understand," said Hilda.

"The point is this: If one or two individuals should wander along here in search of Don, he, or they, would wander directly into my arms, and it would be a cold day if I did not find out some of the things I want to know before he wandered back again."

"I know what I would like to have right now," said Hilda, after a pause.

"Breakfast?" suggested Chick.

She nodded her head with emphasis.

"I am sorry," said Nick, "but we will have to wait till the others overtake us. That is one of the things I forgot all about. It never occurred to me to provide ourselves with food. Chick, are you a bit stiff and sore?"

"Not very. I'm all right."

"Do you want to trot back down the cañon to meet the others and guide them?"

"Sure."

"I think that Tom and Cal will keep along as fast as they can, but that paper I dropped might have blown away, or they might miss it, so——"

"I'm off," said Chick; and he was gone.

"How do you feel, Hilda?" asked Nick. "How did you stand the ride?"

"Fine. And I am so elated to think that we are on the right trail."

"We must not forget that months have passed since Jessie was lost. Still, I think we will find her now."

"So do I. You have convinced me, Mr. Carter. Yesterday at this time I had no faith whatever in the search; now I am sure that it will succeed. And I am sure of more than that, too; really I am."

"What more, Hilda?"

"It is faith; it is a presentiment, or intuition; but I am positive that we shall find Jessie unharmed."

The sun mounted steadily toward the meridian and passed it, and it was three o'clock in the afternoon when Hilda said, confidentially, to Nick:

"I am quite sure that I never before realized what it means to be hungry."

The remark had barely been uttered, however, before Chick, followed by the others of the party, came through the opening in the rocks a quarter of a mile away, and in a few moments more they were all together in the little land-locked shelter which nature had provided for them there.

"Nick," said Tom Short, when they were smoking together after a hearty meal—eaten cold, of course, because it was not thought advisable to light a fire—"I thought you told me that there would be nothing of real detective work connected with this affair."

"I believe I did say something of the kind," admitted the detective.

"Well, let me tell you one thing!"

"Fire away."

"There isn't a scout, or a trailer, or any man at all, in this State or any other State, who could have followed that trail through the night the way you did. You may think it wasn't detective work, but I say it was!"

"So it was," agreed Nick. "Only I wasn't the detective."

"Then I'd like to know who was!"

"Pompous."

"That's so, by thunder!"

"Pompous did all the fine work. He led us here; not I."

"Well, all the same, nobody but you would ever have thought of using Pompous in just the way you did it."

"Possibly not."

"You made Hilda think all the while that she was doing it, eh?"

Nick smiled.

"While, as a matter of fact, yeh was only arrangin' things for the hoss, so's they'd be exactly like they was when he was here before."

"Yes."

"And yeh knowed all the time that that hoss missed his mate and wanted him. Yeh knowed that the hoss knowed where he'd left his mate, and that if he was given half a chance, he'd look f'r him; and, what's more to the p'int, yeh knowed that Pompous 'u'd find Don if once he got half uh chance to do it. If that ain't detective work, I don't know what is!"

"Detective work, as you call it, Tom, doesn't always consist in finding clues."

"Nope. That's no dream. I see that. It consists in knowin' how to prospect for 'em."

"Something like that—yes."

"Jest percisely es a miner knows how to prospect f'r pay-ore. Yeh send a tenderfoot out with a hammer and a pick and an assay outfit, and he might look from here teh kingdom come 'thout findin' a color 'r a showin'; but yeh send out a man that's been up against it before, and he sure will rake up some pay-dirt if there's any around."

"That is exactly the idea, Tom."

"Well, then, what I'm getting at is this: I was all right and onto my business when I broke camp and started f'r the East to find you. Wasn't I?"

"I am glad that you did so, at any rate."

"And at this blessed minute we can gamble that we're not so very dog-goned far from the very spot where Jessie is a prisoner, eh?"

"I think you are right about that."

"Well, I want to tell yeh one thing, Nick."

"What is it?"

"From this time on, no matter what happens, every thing that I own 'r ever hope to own in this world is yourn! That includes my life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, if some howling coyote should wake up in the night and ask yeh. I've met some purty good fellers in my time, but you are head and shoulders above the Goliath of the outfit."

"You will make me blush, Tom, if you keep on at this rate."

"Blush! Boilin' blazes! It's me that ought teh do the blushin'."

"Why so?"

"Teh think—jest teh think that I let yeh run like an Indian all them miles up this mountain range when I might have done it myself if I'd had the sense. However, you, and Chick, and Hilda, too, and Pompous—the hull dog-goned outfit, in fact—have won Tom Short's heart, and don't yeh forgit it, either!"

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE SECRET OF THE PEAR-SHAPED ROCK.

It was decided that no attempt would be made that day to continue the search, for it was already late in the afternoon and there were only a few hours of daylight left to them.

After the discussion which followed their somewhat belated breakfast, Nick strolled over to where the horses were picketed and made a careful examination of Don's sleek coat.

After a little time he returned to where the others were still seated, and remarked:

"I really do not think that we need give ourselves any unnecessary concern about being seen here."

"Why not?" asked Tom.

"Because I am satisfied that Don has worn neither saddle nor bridle in a long time. I doubt, in fact, if he has been used since Jessie rode him here."

"'Cos there ain't no marks on him? Is that the reason?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

"Well," said Tom slowly, "that may 'r may not be an indication. He might ha' been used right along every day, and still have no marks on him."

"How so?"

"I take it that the fellers in that there cavern are more 'r less lujun in their nature, and if they be they wouldn't bother with no saddle, 'r no bridle. They'd jest throw uh leg over his back and tie a string around his under jaw. The rest they'd do with their knees, and they can grip uh horse some, too."

About an hour before dark Nick said to his companions:

"I am going to leave you for awhile."

"What for? Where are you going?" asked Tom.

"I'm going on a little still hunt all by my lonesome."

"I reckon I'll go along with yeh, if yeh don't mind, Nick."

"But I do mind. I wish to do this alone."

"What for? Why?"

"Just because it is my way, Tom. I can think better and work better, sometimes, when I am alone."

"Where are yeh goin' to, anyway?"

"I don't know. I may return here in an hour or two; and again, I may not return before daylight."

"Yeh'r goin' teh look f'r that there cavern, eh?"

"Certainly. That is what we are all looking for."

"And yeh won't take me with yeh?"

"Not this time, Tom."

"All right. You're the boss."

"You will have to remain here and take command of the party in my absence, Tom."

"You're the general, as I said before, and if you say stay here, why, here I stay—till the permanent residence of Satan is turned into an iceberg, if necessary. Where are yeh goin' to look for it?"

"It was my idea," replied Nick, "to go directly around this whole valley. It is about two miles, or a little less, across it, so I figure that I would have a trip of about six to ten miles."

"I reckon yeh'd find it 'u'd be ten and more, too, before yeh got around it, Nick. Say, can I make a suggestion?"

"Certainly."

"What do yeh say, then, if we both go directly across this here place to the other side? Then, from there, you start in one direction and I'll go in the other, and we'll meet back here again. Cal and Chick can look out f'r Hilda; and it 'u'd be a mighty savin' uh time."

"All right, Tom; we will do that."

It was an hour later when they parted from each other at a point in the valley that was directly opposite the place where they were encamped.

Tom took the course to the right, and Nick chose the one to the left, for the reason that he had been all day long studying the contour of the mountains around that valley, and had about made up his mind where he would select to look first for the mountain of gold and its mysterious cavern.

Now that he was alone, he attempted to recall the words of Tom when he had described Hilda's trip to him. He recalled almost the exact words.

"They was packed along the sides of a rocky wall that was damp. . . . They went up an awful incline, where the feller carrying Hilda seemed to cling with one hand while he climbed up steep steps and high ones. . . . They went along a level place. . . . Then they went down a winding way, like a spiral staircase, inside a cylinder, only that it seemed to be a path instead of steps."

Nick had questioned Hilda about this phase of her journey, during the day while they were awaiting the arrival of the others, and she had offered no correction save that she was very positive that before she was lifted from the horse to be carried by a man, she remembered distinctly that they had crossed a wide space which seemed to be deep with grass.

"That was this table-land, or valley, in the top of the mountain," mused the detective. "It seems conclusive that they must have crossed it, either directly or at an angle. It was only when they had gone as far as the horses could carry them that the girls were lifted from the saddles and carried over the more dangerous pathways.

"I must look for a ledge along the side of a rocky wall, where it is narrow and damp," he continued, a little later. "If I find such a place, I will explore it."

But the hills rose sheer in front of him everywhere.

He had gone a third of the distance around the in-

dentures of the boundary of the valley before he discovered an indication of a change, and then he came to a place where the level ground dipped into the mountainside in the shape of a letter V.

The open end of the V, where he was standing, was not more than thirty feet in width, and the place was so located that the moonlight could not penetrate inside of it.

But the detective had that wonderful little electric pocket search-light with him, and now he produced it and then started to examine the place.

The walls inside of that hollowed V were as smooth as if they had been polished, and, indeed, they did have the appearance of having been carved out with a monster chisel.

From the place of entrance to the apex of the V, Nick figured that the distance was approximately one hundred and fifty feet; and there, almost at the apex of the V, he was brought to a standstill before a huge rock that was shaped like a pear with the stem at the top.

It seemed to fill the entire space at the extremity of the cavity; and it seemed, Nick thought, also rather out of place there.

He examined it attentively, induced to do so by a feeling of mere curiosity, for already he was prepared to turn about and retrace his steps to the open again.

But the rock attracted him because it seemed different in its character from the surrounding formation. It looked almost as if it had been *put* there, in fact.

He bent forward nearer to it, throwing the sharp ray of his electric light upon it; and then he discovered something which made him straighten up and look hastily around him, as if he expected to discover some human presence near him.

What he saw was a small red stain against the smooth face of the rock; a red stain which the sharp light he carried at once told him was a spot of dried blood.

But even while he recognized it, he was not entirely satisfied that it was a stain of blood, and the closer he looked the less satisfied he became.

It was not larger than a silver dime—not so large, in fact.

After a moment he produced his handkerchief, and, moistening a corner of it, he rubbed the stain with it.

There was no longer any doubt about it.

The spot had been made there by a stain of blood.

Some person who had wanted that way had cut or bruised a finger so that it bled; that person had had occasion to place his hand against the rock, and in doing so had left the telltale stain.

He lowered the beam of his light and stood there in the darkness, while he thought the matter over carefully.

"That stain wasn't a very old affair," he mused. "It cannot have been there long; not more than a day or two, at the utmost. It was blood, all right. There is no doubt about that. It was left there by the hand of a man, too; I will take that much for granted.

"It was at just the right height for a man of ordinary stature to have left it there when he reached out to touch the rock.

"It was not big enough to indicate that the man who left it there was in any pain because of it. More than likely he did not know that there was blood on his hand at all.

"Now, the question is, why did he reach out to touch that rock? Or, in fact, why did he come into this letter V place at all?

"I am to conclude, if I decide anything, that the people who captured Jessie, and who now detain her, are the only human beings around this locality, and hence it was one of her captors who left that blood-stain on that rock."

He touched the button of his light again and once more gave his attention to the rock.

"It is worn smooth, exactly where that blood-stain was left," he mused. "There is a spot here, almost as large as my palm, where there is practically an indenture in the rock itself, as if for ages that particular spot on the rock had been pressed against by human hands.

"Pressed against! That is the idea."

He noted the spot carefully, and then, returning the search-light to his pocket, he placed both hands against the rock and pushed.

For a moment there was no result; but as he increased the force of the pressure he fancied that the rock trembled beneath his hands.

He pushed still harder, and it moved. He was sure of that now.

Somewhat startled, the detective drew back, and again had recourse to his light.

The result was even more startling than his imagination had been.

*The rock had moved a quarter of the way around; that is, it had moved a quarter of its circumference, and thus it had left a way open for him to advance beyond it.*

It has been said that the rock was pear-shaped.

That is true, save that it was only *one-half of the pear.*

When Nick approached it, the convex side of the pear was toward him. The back side of the rock, instead of being rounded into the shape of a pear, like the front side, was perfectly flat. It was exactly the same as if a pear had been stood on the big end, then cut in half, and the back half of it had been thrown away

The result was, that when it was pushed so that it swung upon its pivot, one-quarter of the way around,

it left an open passageway to the right of it—that is, along the flat part of it—and past it.

And beyond it, where the apex of the V should have been, there was a wide opening where enough of the moonlight entered to show Nick that it was another crevice, or fissure, or, possibly, a cañon in the mountains.

And there in front of him, also, was the narrow ledge "along the side of a rocky wall where it was damp," for which he was searching.

He felt assured now that if he followed along that ledge that ere long he would come to "an awful steep place . . . where he would have to cling with one hand while he climbed up steep steps and high ones."

"I have found the pathway to the cavern of gold," he shouted in his heart, although he made not an actual sound. "I wonder how many centuries ago that pear-shaped rock was fitted into that niche in the hills? And I wonder if that same niche was not originally the handiwork of man? It must have been."

Again he turned off his light, and then, after waiting long enough to satisfy himself that he could proceed in safety without it, he passed through the hole in the rock and out upon the ledge.

In a moment more he was making his way as swiftly as possible, under the circumstances, toward the cavern of gold.

## CHAPTER X.

### INSIDE THE CAVERN OF GOLD.

Nick Carter had not a doubt that he followed that narrow ledge upward of half a mile before he came to the awful "incline where he had to cling with one hand while he climbed up steep steps and high ones."

But the interesting point was that he did arrive at such a place.

It was after he had wound around the mountainside, sometimes half-clinging to the cliff that rose thousands of feet over his head, and avoiding the sometimes necessity of looking down into the black depths below, where, owing to the darkness, he could not see the bottom.

But he had no doubt of the depth of that terrible place.

Twice he dislodged a piece of rock, and sent it hurtling through space toward the bottom; and each time he listened in vain to hear it strike.

Fortunately, the moon was almost directly over his head, so he was provided with the best sort of light for his adventure.

Other men might have drawn back and waited for daylight; or they might have thought it prudent to return for the companions of the trip instead of attempting the hazardous journey alone.

Not so Nick Carter!

The "awful steep place" was another marvel.

He found it where the ledge along which he had been traveling came to an abrupt termination.

Here deep niches had been cut into the side of the cliff; there were the "steps."

Above them, and following their course, a rail had been fastened into the rock, and as Nick studied it before seizing upon it to continue his ascent, he uttered a half-audible exclamation.

The rail was solid gold!

But even that fact was not what surprised him most; it was that the braces which held it had been fastened into the drilled holes in the rock in precisely the same manner that the feat is accomplished at the present time; that is, with the aid of brimstone.

He seized upon it with both hands and began to climb, knowing full well that it could not give way with him; and yet it was a horrible thought to think of all those hundreds of feet—possibly thousands of them—of space beneath him.

The steps were high and they were long; more than that, they seemed interminable.

He counted them as he advanced, and there were one hundred and forty-nine of them; and they had taken him up and up until he was far above the ledge he had left, until he was like a fly clinging to the face of the cliff.

But they came to an end at last, and he stepped out upon a platform—or, rather, *in* upon a sort of platform, that was large and roomy; and here he rested.

The rocks arched over his head, for the place was a crevicé in the smooth side of the cliff; a sort of resting-place after the terrible journey up the face of the cliff.

"What next, I wonder?" he muttered. "Oh, yes, I had forgotten. I must find a place now where I descend a steep path which is like a spiral staircase inside a cylinder; and I suppose I must look for it somewhere around the back end of this grotto."

A few moments served to rest him sufficiently, and, as the interior of the grotto was as dark as blackest night, he again had recourse to his pocket light.

He gave a little attention to the grotto itself, first, and he was not surprised to discover many evidences of human presence there.

It was evidently used as a sort of workshop during the day, for there were shavings about; there was a rude kind of a bench, and there were a number of very primitive tools, such as he had never seen before.

"I'm getting warm, as a schoolboy would say," he mused, regarding these things.

The grotto was semicircular in shape, and extended back into the mountain rather more than a hundred feet.

Its floor was a perfectly flat and smooth rock; its roof was like one-half of a dome.

"I have seen more marvels of nature on this one trip than I ever saw before in all my life," he thought. "Now, I wonder if those chaps who reside here are asleep? I wonder if they do their sleeping at night, like other humans? It is to be presumed that they do so.

"Also, it is to be supposed that they are not afraid of burglars, even though they have so much gold lying around loose. Gee! I begin to think that this place would make Standard Oil look like thirty cents—and I guess it would, since they can afford to hammer their buttons out of solid gold, and make their railing of it as well. Idaho is the richest State in the Union—and don't know it. King Solomon's mines weren't one, two, three alongside of this place.

"Well, if our spectacular friends are not in fear of burglars, and if they sleep in the night-time, like other folks, it is to be presumed that they are by now in the arms of Murphy—or Morpheus.

"I don't suppose they keep dogs, either. Dogs would have a hard time getting in and out of here, and so I am to conclude that I may roam unmolested around these diggings—if I only keep quiet."

He looked at his watch and discovered that it was an hour after midnight.

"Just the right time," he thought.

Then he started straight back for the uttermost depth of the grotto, moving cautiously lest he should step off into that cylindrical place that had been described to him.

He found it.

He discovered, moreover, that it was protected by another golden rail, which ran entirely around it; and he found where there was an opening through the rail, where a path led down into the darkness.

"Yonder lies my way," he murmured; "but where is the end of it?"

Perceiving that the path would not be difficult to follow, he seized his light more firmly in his grasp and began the descent.

The description that Tom had given him, afterward supplemented by Hilda, had been a good one; the place certainly was like the inside of a cylinder, although a mammoth one.

But it was not so deep as he had expected it would be.

From the top to the bottom it was not more than fifty feet; but when he arrived there he was puzzled, for at first there seemed to be no way out of the cylinder.

However, he presently discovered a door which was fastened only with a rude latch.

He raised this, and passed into a wide corridor, closing the door after him, and latching it, lest by leaving it open a draft should be created which might awaken and alarm the occupants of the place.

Pausing a moment, he shoved one of the dimming-caps over the eye of his lantern, so that it could emit only a faint glow of light, and then, with extreme caution, he proceeded on his way.

The corridor he was now traversing led him straight through the mountain, and at no place along it, as he proceeded, was there so much as the suggestion of another outlet to it.

That it was the outer corridor to the cavern of gold, and that it led directly to that wonderful place, the detective had not a doubt; but he was not prepared to travel quite such a distance before he reached it. Neither Tom nor Hilda had prepared him for this.

At the end of it he came to a second latched door, and here he took the precaution to extinguish his light entirely before opening it, or attempting to do so.

The door opened readily, but only to reveal a second one beyond it, so close that the two almost touched; and this one, he perceived, swung into the room beyond.

He opened it cautiously and carefully, a fraction of an inch at a time, for he discovered, as soon as it was a trifle ajar, that there was a light of some kind burning beyond it.

At last it was far enough open so that he could peer into the room, and, when he did so, he was startled to discover that, in addition to the light, there was also a man in the room.

A glance told Nick that it was the old man of Hilda's description, for, although he was seated with his back toward the door where Nick was standing, there was no difficulty in recognizing him from the description given.

A lamp—exactly like the one of Hilda's description—was burning on the table. A huge pile of parchment was on the table beside the lamp. An ink-well, made of a cow's horn, and half a dozen quills were also there; and there was also a very modern-looking pile of paper, upon part of which the old man had evidently been writing.

He did not stir when Nick pushed the door open, and the detective, perceiving that the floor was covered by a soft, blanket-looking rug which would emit no sound, stepped through the door softly and closed it noiselessly behind him.

He knew from the attitude of the old man that he was sleeping; and, having come thus far, Nick did not propose that the mere presence of a sleeping man should turn him back from his purpose.

Stepping forward softly, he peered over the old man's shoulder at the paper upon which he had been writing; but, although Nick Carter speaks and reads fluently almost all of the modern languages, this writing was in a tongue that was entirely unknown to him.

He stepped back then, a little distance away from the old man, and, raising his eyes, looked around the room; and he saw—without surprise this time—that the far side of the room glistened like gold in the light of the lamp.

"This, then," he thought, "is the antechamber to the cavern of gold. This is the first, or outer, room of the cavern proper. It is in that direction, beyond that wall of gold through which I see there is a doorway, where I must search for the other apartments.

"I wonder if that old chap will awaken, and discover me? I hope not—for his own sake. He is too old to hurt, or even to handle roughly."

He passed around the sleeping man, treading softly, and so made his way to the door he had seen through the wall of gold, which stood invitingly open.

There was another light, too, beyond it; another lamp of the same pattern; and he passed on, dropping the curtain behind him and pulling it along, the better to hide himself from view should the old man open his eyes.

And now he was in a high, wide corridor, where there were openings on either side, at short intervals.

These were not, correctly speaking, doors, for there were no doors set into them.

Beyond them, as Nick looked in as he passed, he saw excavations in various stages of procedure, and he halted before one of these, greatly enlightened by what he saw.

"I understand it now," was his thought. "This is truly a mountain of gold. In other words, a huge block of solid gold, melted and run together into one mass by volcanic action, has been deposited here ages ago.

"And this chunk of solid gold has served two purposes: It has provided the old kings or rulers of this country with as much of the metal as was desired, and it has also afforded an opportunity of literally building a palace of gold.

"They have toiled at it to hollow out of it rooms and corridors—a palace. Some of the rooms were finished, and many were not, when the work was abandoned. It is a wonderful place, indeed!"

He passed on again, and came upon another large room, not unlike the one where the old man was sleeping, only that here the four sides of the room, and the ceiling and floor as well, were carved out of the precious metal.

As before, there was a table in the center of the room; and also, as before, there was a man seated at that table.

But, quite different from that other experience, this time the man was not sleeping.

Indeed, he was very much awake.

He was standing, when Nick discovered him, with his back against the table; and with arms folded across his breast, he was staring moodily down the very corridor along which the detective was advancing.

So fixed was his stare, and so moody was his brow, that for a moment Nick thought that he had been discovered, and that the man was merely waiting there in sullen silence for him to enter the room.

And then he realized that he had not been seen.

The man was staring at nothing. He was lost in a reverie.

## CHAPTER XI.

### JESSIE.

The detective stopped in his tracks, and then slowly withdrew until he felt assured that he would not be seen.

"There must be something doing around this place to-night," was his thought. "All the inhabitants seem to be sitting up and keeping their clothes on. I wonder what for?

"I don't believe that the old fossil back there is in the habit of sleeping in his chair, and I don't believe that he has to sit up nights in order to keep his accounts straight. It isn't at all likely that this young chap just in front of me spends his nights with his arms folded and his back against a table, dreaming.

"Something has happened. Something unusual is going on, and it is up to me to find out what it is."

He had just arrived at this point in his conjectures when a curtain at the opposite side of the big room where the young man was standing was lifted and a figure came through it.

Without question, this was the old woman of whom Hilda had spoken as the one who had waited upon her while she was a prisoner.

Nick decided instantly that if the old man in the outer room was the great-grandfather of the family, this woman must be the great-grandmother.

She went directly to the young man who leaned against the table, and, resting one hand against his arm, she talked to him earnestly for some moments.

Nick could not even hear the murmur of their voices from where he watched them, but he knew, from their manner and from their gestures, that they were discussing a subject of great seriousness.

The young man seemed despondent. Several times he shook his head with a sort of despairing gesture. Once he flung up his hands, as if he had exclaimed: "There is no hope!"

Then, suddenly, as if they had not discussed that phase of the subject, they turned as with one impulse and, crossing the room rapidly, passed beyond the curtain and disappeared.

Nick Carter lost no time in following them.

They had barely dropped the curtain behind them when he was upon their trail—and he pulled it apart a little and peered after them before they were ten feet away from him.

There seemed to be lights everywhere in the cavern that night, as well as people who were up and dressed and roaming about the place. Indeed, the detective's

impression was that the people he had seen thus far had not taken off their clothes at all.

"I wonder if the things they wear could be called clothes," he thought, smiling. "I imagine they would bring a good price in the open market, judging from the jewels they wear on 'em and the gold they are decorated with."

It was true.

Even under the stress of the moment, when Nick first discovered the young man where he stood leaning against the table, he had noticed the costume he wore.

It was not like anything that the detective had ever seen before, save that it was made of doeskin that had been tanned so beautifully that it was as soft and as white as cloth.

In cut and fashion there was a suggestion of Spanish about it; and there was a suggestion of the medieval, too; for the moment that Nick's eyes rested upon the young man, his mind recalled the costume of *Bassanio*, in the "Merchant of Venice."

It was all very picturesque and very remarkable, considering that the time was in the twentieth century and the place a remote locality in the very center of the Bitter Root Mountains.

The appearance of the young man himself was striking, too.

He was tall and well-formed and handsome, with lofty brow and somber eyes; with regular features and sensitive nostrils and lips; with rounded chin and a complexion which suggested the hue of the touch of red in the gold of the walls around him, almost as if it were reflected there; with small hands and feet, and with a certain air of nobility clinging to him, which even in the depths of his reverie he did not lose.

Nick did not doubt that it was he for whom Jessie had been destined as a bride—whose wife she even now might be; and yet, somehow, he did not believe that—or he refused to accept it, yet.

He watched the old woman and the young man narrowly as they passed along the corridor together—a corridor which extended a long way beyond them and where, at intervals, the small golden lamps, such as already described, dispelled the gloom.

And everywhere there was gold. Golden walls and ceilings and floors, although the latter were partly covered by the curiously woven rugs.

And, at intervals, along the corridor where the lights burned, there were doorways through the walls on either side of the corridor.

It was in front of one of these, some distance beyond the curtain which divided the corridor from the big room, that the woman and the young man came to a stop.

He waited outside while she entered alone; but she was absent only a moment when she returned and said something to him in a whisper.

Nick saw him raise her withered old hand and touch it to his lips, with all the deference of a trained courtier; and then they both started back along the corridor, directly toward the detective.

He had barely time to step into one of the doorways for concealment, and if they had not been so preoccupied they must have discovered him.

As it was, they passed within a few feet of where he stood, and continued on until the curtain at the end of the corridor fell behind them.

Nick turned then, quickly, and hurried to the doorway where the two had paused, and where the young man had waited while the old woman entered the room beyond it.

There was a light in the room, and, as Nick stepped forward and drew back the curtain so that he could peer inside, he could barely restrain himself from exclaiming aloud.

It might have been the very same room in which Hilda had been imprisoned while she was in the cavern, so far as the description of it went. There were the chairs, the quaint table, the golden lamp, the rug on the floor, and the couch at one side of the room.

But the couch was occupied.

A young woman—a girl—was lying there, apparently asleep—or dead. The detective was not sure which in that first glance.

But in a moment he saw, by the steady rise and fall of the soft blanket that covered her, that she was sleeping, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He knew that he had found Jessie; and he also knew at once that Jessie had been, or was now, very ill.

She was lying on her back, her head supported by a pillow that was covered with one of those strangely woven blankets, as light and soft and delicate as the finest wool, and her wealth of red-brown hair strayed over it in confused profusion.

Her face—and one of her small hands where it peeped from under the blanket—was as white as the snow on the

peaks of the mountains outside, and she looked thin and wan, but as beautiful as an angel.

The detective cast one hurried glance behind him along the corridor, and then, without pausing to consider the consequences, he entered the room, passed swiftly to the couch, and, bending forward, rested his right hand lightly on her forehead.

It was cool to the touch, and the detective breathed a sigh of relief, for he knew then that if there had been a fever in her veins it had passed and the crisis was over and gone.

He understood now why the old woman had entered the room alone; he understood now why the young man had kissed her withered hand when she returned to him with the news of the change in the condition of their patient.

He had raised his head while these thoughts came to him, and now he looked down again—and he discovered that Jessie's eyes were wide open and that she was regarding him wonderingly.

He was startled lest his sudden appearance there would throw her into another fever, and he bent down swiftly and whispered softly:

"Tom Short, and Cal Huskins, and Hilda, and I have come to find you, Jessie, but when your friends of the cavern return here, you must not let them know that you have seen me. You have been very ill," he added. "I can see that."

"Yes," she whispered; and then, after a considerable pause, she added: "How long have I been here in this strange place?"

"Not very long," replied Nick soothingly.

"There have been strange people waiting upon me," she whispered brokenly to him then. "I have seen them and know that they were around me at intervals, and then I went to sleep again each time. Oh, it seems so long ago. But they have been very kind to me. I think I am better now. My head does not ache, and——"

Her glance had wandered from his face to the doorway, and she paused suddenly in what she was saying.

He followed the direction of her gaze with his own eyes, and he saw, standing framed in the doorway, the old woman and the young man, and beyond and behind them were three other tall, masculine forms.

They were silent, and as motionless as statues. They looked as if they might all have been carved from bronze, decorated with clothing and jewels, and placed there on exhibition.

Nick did not lose his presence of mind.

He realized that he was discovered and that he must face the consequences of it; and he also understood that these strange people were even at that moment considering the condition and the peril of the sick girl before everything else.

He made no sign whatever toward them. He did not permit the expression of his face to change; but he turned his eyes calmly from them back again to the patient on the couch.

"Those are the friends who have cared for you while you were ill, Jessie," he said to her soothingly. "I wonder if you could close your eyes and sleep again, now. Could you?"

"Yes. If you will hold your hand where it is now—on my forehead," she whispered, in return.

And so he stood there for a long time, with his right hand resting on her head and with the index-finger of his left hand pressed against his own lips as a request for absolute silence on the part of the people at the door; and Jessie closed her big eyes and gradually lapsed into slumber.

He did not move at all until he was assured that she was sleeping.

But then he softly withdrew his hand, straightened up, and as softly and noiselessly moved toward the doorway, where the five grim figures were awaiting him.

They drew back, silently, as he approached them, and he raised his hand and pointed significantly toward the room where he had first discovered the young man.

They understood.

With one accord they moved on in advance of him toward that room, and two of them held back the curtains for him to enter it.

They would have stopped there, but again Nick pointed ahead of him, toward the corridor and the room beyond it, where he had discovered the old man asleep in his chair.

Again these silent people seemed to understand, for again they led the way, with Nick following behind them; and so they entered that first big room which the detective had discovered in the cavern.

The old man was seated there still, exactly as Nick had seen him. Apparently he had not moved since the detective passed that way; but now, as they entered,

he started wide-awake, and stared with his dim eyes at the stranger before him.

Then his gaze wandered from Nick to the others, who had grouped themselves in silence around them; and thus they remained for many minutes.

And all this time there was not a word uttered or a sound made; nor was there a motion among them all.

The detective understood, in that moment, the awful oppressiveness of utter silence under strained conditions.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE RESCUE.

"Who are you?" demanded the old man, at last, speaking in perfect English, while the others remained as they had been, and as expressionless as sphinxes.

"My name would tell you nothing, sir," replied the detective calmly, "but I have no objections to telling it. I am one Nicholas Carter."

"Why are you here?"

"I came in search of the young lady whom you stole away from her friends and brought to this cavern, a prisoner."

"How did you get here?"

"By moving the pear-shaped rock, by following the path along the gulch, by climbing the steps over the side of the cliff."

"Who told you of these things? How did you know of the route to this place?"

"My ancestors," replied Nick, with sudden inspiration.

The old man blinked at him strangely and was silent. Then he turned and waved his hand toward the others with an imperious gesture, and said something to them in a language which the detective did not understand; and at once they silently withdrew from the room, leaving Nick alone with the ancient relic of a forgotten period.

It occurred to Nick then that he could easily escape if he chose to do so; but he argued that it would avail nothing if he did. They could easily prevent his return, even if he were accompanied by an army of men. That cavern could never be carried by storm. Diplomacy and soft words alone could rescue Jessie. Force—unless that force were already in the cavern, which it was not—could never accomplish it. One man alone might hold it forever against thousands. So he stood there silently, and waited for the old man to speak again.

"Since when have you known of the pathway here?" the old man demanded presently. "Since when did your ancestors point it out to you?"

"To my fathers before me since the dawn of time," replied Nick; and the old man bowed his head and seemed to murmur a prayer to himself. At last he looked up again.

"You do not seek the gold?" he asked tremblingly.

"No. I seek the girl whom you stole away from her friends."

"It was a wrong; I admit that, Nicholas Carter. But I believed that I was right in doing it. She is an orphan. Her father and her mother have gone to the Great Beyond, where your ancestors, and mine, and hers are waiting for us. Her mother was a descendant through many, many generations, from my people."

"She has been very ill," said Nick, not caring to pursue this line of talk, in which he had no confidence or interest.

"Unto death; but she is out of danger now."

"Has harm come to her, old man?"

The old eyes glittered for a moment at the detective, and then the reply came calmly:

"None. She is beloved by us. She is beloved by my grandson. In the delirium of her fever she has cried aloud for her friends. She was brought here to become the wife of my grandson, but, although he loves her, he would have returned her to her people. Within a week, if you had not come here, she would have been with them again. Now——"

He paused.

"What now?" asked Nick.

"Now," replied the old man slowly, "it may not be; unless——"

"Unless—what?"

"Unless you will consent to sacrifice yourself for her. You have come here alone. You may never again leave this cavern, this palace of gold which the rulers of my fathers who lived before time began carved from this solid mass of gold."

All this time Nick was standing with his back toward the curtain through which the old woman and the four men had disappeared; and now, when he would have replied to the old man's statement, he felt himself seized suddenly from behind. His arms were pinioned to his sides before he could offer resistance. A golden chain

was drawn around them quickly, pinioning them behind his back. Another was thrown around his ankles, and, although he struggled, in another moment he was securely fastened to a ring that was set into the wall near one corner of the room.

When that was done, the four men who had attacked him silently withdrew. They had not spoken; but now the old man approached him again.

"You will not be harmed," he said, "unless you try to escape. In that case, your life will be forfeit;" and, without another word, he went away.

"I have made a mess of this affair, all right," was Nick's thought when he was alone.

* * * * * * *

They were primitive people, those who had captured Nick Carter.

It did not occur to them to search him. They did not know of the efficacy of modern tools, nor did the old man guess that Nick Carter carried a pocket-case of them, as well as other things which he found indispensable in his profession, in his pockets. Even if they had discovered them, they would not have known what they were, or the uses to which they were adapted. All they did was merely to remove the belt which held his revolvers, and even that they placed carelessly upon the table in that same room.

By squirming his body into unimaginable contortions, and by straining his arms, Nick did succeed, at last, in reaching the pocket which contained that case of tools. The rest was comparatively easy.

The sharp file cut through the soft gold of which the chain was made with ease, and with despatch, although the detective had to work with his hands behind him. But he had not been alone an hour before he stood free again, with the golden chains littering the floor beside him.

He lost no time then.

His first move was to secure his weapons and to strap them upon his body again. He knew then that he could fight all the men there were there, if the necessity should arise.

Then, with exceeding caution, he passed swiftly through the corridors of the cavern, peering through doorways as he went, for all the lamps were still burning. Evidently, they were never extinguished at all.

In one of these rooms he discovered the old man, sleeping gently and peacefully. In another the old woman had put herself to rest. In others, one after another, he discovered the young man and the three who were of middle age.

All were sleeping. Worn out by their constant vigil over the sick girl, and secure in the belief that the chains of gold would hold their captive, they had gone to rest, knowing that the sick girl was out of danger and was also sleeping.

"It is now, or never," thought he detective; and he passed rapidly to the room where he had found Jessie.

With a touch, he awakened her. With his lips close to her ear, he whispered:

"I will save you, if you will keep absolutely still and trust me implicitly. The people of the cavern are sleeping. They will sleep for many hours, please God!"

He wrapped the blankets around her tenderly, until she was encased in them like a mummy; and he fastened them in place with a horsehair lasso that he had found in the outer room; and, when all was prepared, he lifted her in his arms, and, treading softly, traversed the corridors and the two large rooms of the cavern, moving swiftly. He made his way out of the strange dwelling-place into the cylinderlike hole, thence up the winding pathway, and across the ledge to the edge of the gulf.

Here he paused long enough to wind what remained of the horsehair rope around his own body, and secure it there, thus binding his burden to him; and then he seized the gold railing and began the perilous descent of the steps.

Thence he sped along the ledge with all the speed he dared to use; and so, at last, he passed the pear-shaped rock, pausing long enough to move it back into place, as he had found it originally.

And now he hurried forward out of the V-shaped cut in the hills; out upon the grassy plain, where the sun was shining brightly half-way between its point of rising and the zenith, showing that the time was about nine in the morning; and then, running as swiftly as he could with his burden, he started across the stretch toward the spot where he knew he would find his friends awaiting him—or, at least, where some of them would be awaiting him, for he would have been missed, and Tom would already be searching for him, he thought.

But he had not covered a quarter of the distance before he was discovered from the opposite side of the valley.

In that clear atmosphere he could distinguish clearly,

and he saw Tom Short dash out toward him, riding one horse and leading another.

* * * * * * *

An hour later the cavalcade started down the succession of cañons toward the coulée. The rescuers were on their way home with the rescued.

And big Tom Short sat on his powerful horse like a centaur, with Jessie, still sleeping and still swaddled in the blankets that Nick had tied around her, safely enveloped in his great, strong arms.

Once Nick sought to relieve him for a time of his burden, but Tom laughingly replied to the request:

"She is like a feather, Nick. She sure is. And my heart is that light that it is jest like uh balloon, liftin' us both up until we don't seem to touch the earth at all. If yeh don't know what that feelin' is, jest yeh lose somebody yeh love as I do this girl, and then have her returned to yeh the way yeh brought Jessie back to me. It'll make yeh feel jest like yeh don't weigh nothin' utal."

And so the story of Jessie's rescue is told.

Nick did tell Tom about his conversation with the old man, and what he had said about the ancestors of Jessie, and he added:

"When you open that steel box, Tom, possibly you will find an explanation of it all."

"Mebby so," was the reply. "But it won't be opened 'till she's twenty-one."

Later, when the cavern of gold was mentioned, Tom voiced the feeling of all of them when he said:

"I reckon that we don't want no doggoned part of it, do we? Some day, mebby, if we all go broke, we'll search for it; but jest now I vote that we leave it where it is."

THE END.

The next issue, No. 502, will be "Ismalla, the Chieftain; or, Nick Carter Among the Barbarians." Ready next week.


ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE

# TIP TOP WEEKLY

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 169 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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